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ABSTRACT

Yaaruilta stories are told by children of all ages in Yupik-speaking Eskimo villages in Alaska. These stories are illustrated by figures sketched in mud with a ceremonial knife. The sustained involvement and effort of the children engaged in Yaaruilta may aid cognitive development by encouraging the learning of culturally related geometrical abstraction. With its demonstrative pronouns, the Yupik language may give children the tools to develop accurate geometrical figures. It is essential to document oral activities such as Yaaruilta before Eskimo languages are replaced by Western languages. In addition, parents and teachers outside Alaska can use this activity for language enrichment by providing mud and a plastic knife and by presenting children with a set of basic symbols. The child draws the symbols with the knife while simultaneously telling the story. In this way, Yaaruilta is similar to allowing a child to use a puppet while practicing language skills. Both methods reduce the child's inhibition. (Appendices include a set of symbols used in knife storytelling and two sample stories.) (CB)

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Yupik Eskimo Folklore & Children's Play Activities

by

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and
Anna Phillip, Mayor of Tuluksak

Tuluksak is a village located some 50 miles upstream from Bethel on the Tuluksak River in western Alaska. The population consists of over 325 Yupik speaking Eskimos. The parents of Tuluksak are preparing to start a preschool. In other villages, preschools and daycare centers have been started with curricula based primarily on white, western cultures and values. This picture captures a traditional form of story telling, Yaariulta (The English translation of Yaaruilta is "Let's go story knife". The word "Yaaruilta" was intentionally chosen to reflect the importance of the act or process of story telling.)

Yaaruilta stories are illustrated by figures sketched in mud using a "ceremonial knife." When visiting Tuluksak, and other Yupik villages, one sees children of all ages squatting for hours while drawing story knife tales in the mud. It is clear that Yaaruuilta receives sustained involvement and effort from the children. But what skills are they using and learning? What culturally related geometrical abstraction is shown in story knife tales, through games in which children try to identify a house by a sketch of its floor plan. How accurate are the geometrical abstractions a young child creates? Does the Yupik language with its demonstrative pronouns give the children the tools to develop this skill?

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A review of the literature has revealed two excellent, but dated, studies of Yaaruilta. Oswalt (1) studied the story knife tales from Yup girls in Napaskiak. He provided excellent accounts of studies from about 20 years ago. In a master's thesis by Ager (2) the geographic distribution and variations in the basic forms of story knife tales were compared. No prior work has been found that relates to the cognitive development or educational skills that are evidenced by the practice of Yaaruilta.

The ability of village children to speak their native languages is seriously threatened by the recent appearance of western media in almost all parts of rural Alaska. If the present trends continue, it is likely that only a small percentage of native children will speak a native language as their primary language within a few years. Oral activities such as Yaaruilta lose their traditional character as activities and concepts when translated into English. Thus, it is essential that these activities be documented in their present form, while they still represent authentic cultural activities.

How can a parent or teacher use this wonderful language-enriched play activity with children outside Alaska? This Yupik cultural activity can be practiced anywhere in the world. All that is needed is dirt and water to make thick mud. Before you say, 'Mud! Oh no, It's too messy.', remember that if we were able to bring it to the Los Angeles Hilton for the NAEYC Conference, then you could surely do it in a classroom. But why mud? Why not shaving cream or sand? Those would be fine, too.

Just try to remember when you were a child making mud pies. There is nothing quite like it for a child. Mud has depth and texture and it takes some handling skills to maneuver. You feel like you have really accomplished something. Yet there are no right answers in this type of activity. The mud can be placed in a plastic container, and used on a wooden board indoors or in a designated area outside the classroom.

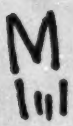
Anna has provided symbols and two stories that her father taught her. Let your children decide which symbols are most interesting. The child draws the symbols with a plastic knife while simultaneously telling the story. In this way, Yaaruilta has a function similar to allowing a child to use a puppet to reduce inhibition while gaining language skills. The child uses the knife to draw each symbol and then by scooping a little mud on her knife, erases the previous symbol and proceeds to the next.

If a curriculum is to be successful, it must be individualized and full of personal meaning and importance to each chil[illegible] What better way is there to bring meaning to the curriculum than to [illegible]low children to "Yaaruilta"!

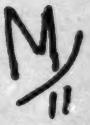
Sample of Symbols Used in Knife Storytelling

woman

woman



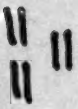
man



man

person sitting

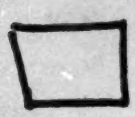
person laying



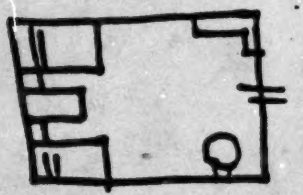
person talking

boat

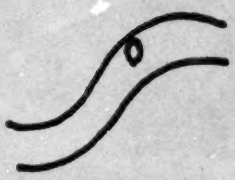
canoe



house



inside house



river

women packing water

man packing water

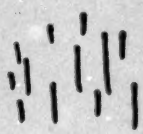
man chopping wood

berries

bay

girl

tree

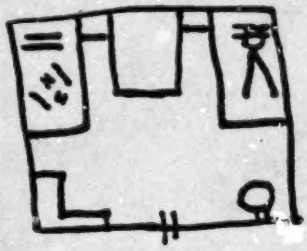


lots of trees

A STORY

(1) Once upon a time there lived an old lady and her grandson. (2) The old lady told her grandson to go out and cut wood, because they were short on wood. (3) So the grandson went out and chopped wood, (4) when he entered the house again the old lady asked him to pack water from the river, (5,6) so he packed water just like his grandmother told him to do. (7) When he entered the house the old lady told him that it was time to eat, (8) so they ate together and afterwards (9) they went to their beds because it was time to sleep.

#1



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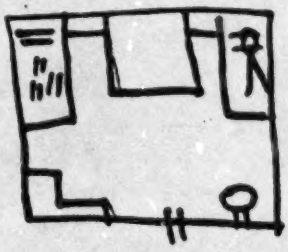

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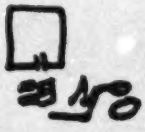

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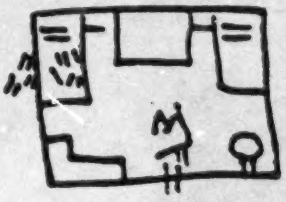

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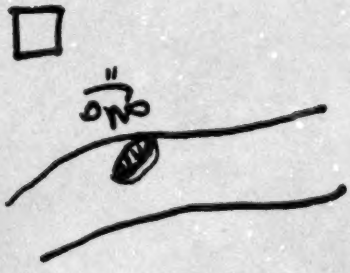

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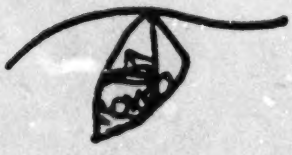

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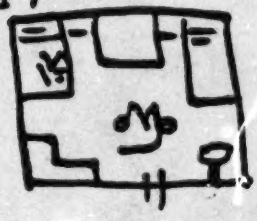

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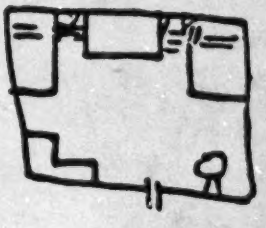

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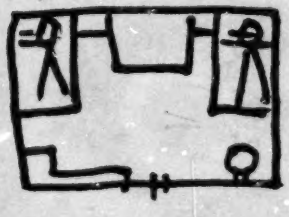

TWO OLD LADIES

(1) Once upon a time there lived two old ladies along the river. (2) They have pathways made up of straws, that leads to different directions, one pathways leads to where they pick berries, and one leads to where the outhouse is. (3) One morning the old lady got up early and went to the bathroom. While she was there, she heard from a distance, someone singing, it goes like this. "There are two old ladies living along the side of the river. I am going there to eat them up, first I am going to break them in half, then eat them."

(4) The old lady got very scared that she ran to wake up the other old lady, (5) which she was sleeping and very hard to wake up. (6) She told her what she had heard out there when she was in the outhouse and (8) while she was there she heard someone singing, louder than the first one. "There are two old ladies living along the side of the river. I am going there to eat them up, first I am going to break them in half, then eat them."

(9) She too got scared and ran to the house. They started to pack all their belongings. (10) Along the side of the river there lie an old, torn canoe that has never been used for many years. (11) The old lady got it to the river and stomp it and the old canoe became brand new. (12) They started to gather their pathways that leads to picking berry site, and to the outhouse site. They gather everything that is around them and put them in the canoe. (13) The very last thing they did was, dig out their old house and (14) put it in the canoe and (15) they started down the river. Every time someone is singing to eat them

it would be closer and louder. (16) When they traveled couple of bends they got very startled, because the singing came right under the canoe. "There are two old ladies living alone the side of the river. I am going to eat them up, first I am going to break them in half, then eat them."

(17) When it quit singing, they looked under the water and guess what they saw, a small needle fish, eyes closes shut, mouth wide open singing. (18) The two old ladies looked at each other and siad to one another, (19) so this is what has been scaring us to death, why don't we catch him and break him in half and with one big bite ate him. (20) They happily went back to their site and put everything back to where they were, straw pathways to berry picking site and one that leads to their outhouse were unrolled back to where they were. They put their house back to where it was and lived happily ever after.

#1

#2

"Two Old Ladies"

#3

#4

#5

#6

#7

#8

#9

#10

#11

#12

#13

#14

#15

#16

#17

#18

#19

#20

References

(1) Oswalt, Wendell. Traditional Story Knife Tales of Yup Girls, Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, 108, 4 (1964)

(2) Ager, Lynn. The Eskimo Story Knife Complex of Southwestern Alaska, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, MS Thesis, (1970).

Cover: Roger Green

The scene shows Eskimo children engaged in knife story telling.